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THE POWER OF DOGU

CERAMIC FIGURES FROM ANCIENT JAPAN

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CERAMIC FIGURES FROM ANCIENT JAPAN

Edited by Simon Kaner

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Ishibashi Shigeto and Nicole Coolidge Rousmaniere

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DOGU BROKEN AND ENSHRINED: TRACES OF A JOMON WORLD VIEW

Harada Masayuki

The act of 'throwing away' probably had particular significance for Jōmon people, a significance that far transcends our modern understanding of simply throwing away rubbish. The great majority of dogū were found broken, the fragments discarded. We can imagine this happening after they had played their part in some ceremonial or ritual activity, practices that were perhaps overseen by village elders or Jōmon 'priests' who exercised special, possibly magical powers. These ritual occasions may be compared to the *matsuri* or festivals of traditional Japan.

One of the best places to investigate this phenomenon is the site of Shakadō in Yamanashi prefecture (fig. 35). A large number of fragments were excavated there, and of the 1,116 individual dogū recovered, only one had something close to a complete body. Even this seemingly whole dogū, upon closer observation, is missing its right arm. A further twenty-two fragments from the site were matched up with what archaeologists called 'companion pieces', sherds from single dogū that could be put back together. The excavations at Shakadō were divided into two halves by a shallow valley, which was thought to mark a boundary between the eastern and western sectors of the original Jōmon settlement complex. This division was no barrier to dogū rituals, however, and pieces of a single ceramic figure were found on both sides of the valley. Other companion pieces were separated by up to 230 m, which is greater than the distance across most Jōmon settlements of this period. With so many fragments found in separate contexts and locations, it seems likely that the dogū were deliberately dismembered by breaking and then deposited.

Fig. 35 Excavations at Shakadō in the late 1970s produced a large number of dogū fragments.

Fig. 36 Jōmon potters created ceramics in large quantities. Pieces of figure are often found in large pottery middens, such as this one at Sannai Maruyama in Aomori prefecture.

Fig. 37 A small number of dogū were 'enshrined' in pits at Shakadō, Yamanashi prefecture.

In many Jōmon settlements the dead were buried in cemeteries located at the centre of the site. Associated with these areas, which often contained large quantities of broken pottery and other apparent debris, are traces of ceremonies at which prayers and invocations would have been made to the spirits of the natural world, of which the Jōmon people saw themselves as an integral part. Archaeologists have recognized these areas as special locations, where offerings were made of objects that were at the end of their useful life. When a pot was broken, which would have been a very common occurrence, its remains were bid farewell as in a funeral, 'sent off' rather than just thrown away. These 'sending off' rites may have taken place on a seasonal basis, or perhaps and when items were disposed of (fig. 36). At Shakadō, not only were pottery cooking vessels sent off at these special dumps but also damaged ceramic figures, or 'injured' dogū. This reference to 'injured' dogū reflects their sacred nature.

This was not the only way in which dogū were deposited. At Gōhara, a now famous dogū with a heart-shaped face (cat. 17) was discovered amid a setting of stones that had been arranged to create a cist, about 150 cm long and between 40 and 60 cm wide. The figure was lying down when discovered, and although all the pieces were present, the lower body was broken into three. Similar stone cists were often constructed to house Jōmon burials, in particular during the Late Jōmon, and some archaeologists have argued that the Gōhara figure was either buried accompanying a deceased person, whose mortal remains have long since perished, or was itself the focus of a burial ceremony. This form of deposition can be thought of as the 'enshrinement' of the dogū. In these cases, although the dogū are often broken, all the pieces are placed in a single location, making their reconstruction relatively straightforward. There are no examples of these enshrined dogū until well into the Middle Jōmon period, and even then they remain very rare.

While similar to the enshrined dogū, the pit burials at Shakadō and Tanabatake in Nagano prefecture perhaps represent a variation on this theme. The Tanabatake 'Jōmon Venus' (cat. 3) was found on its side in a shallow pit. Shakadō has a comparable example, although here just the lower parts of the figure were found near the bottom of the pit (fig. 37). Other pit burials are known from elsewhere in the Jōmon archipelago, notably Nakaya in Yamanashi prefecture (fig. 39). The practice continued into the Final Jōmon, and relatively complete dogū have been discovered at Satohama in the picturesque surroundings of Matsushima Bay in Miyagi prefecture, and Asōda Ōhashi in Aichi prefecture towards the west. These later examples suggest that rituals involving dogū were becoming increasingly complex.

From the excavated remains, we can therefore identify three main ways in which dogū were deposited. The first comprises the sending off of dogū, which probably played an important role in some ritual ceremonies, with pieces of their broken bodies being distributed around the village. In the second, complete dogū were enshrined in specific locations, often within the community cemetery, sometimes marked by the erection of an arrangement of stones. In the third case, dogū were carefully buried in a pit dug into the earth.

Jōmon rituals and dogū

As we have seen in chapter 1, the Meiji-period archaeologists – Ōno Nobutarō, and later Yawata Ichirō and Ōba Iwao – noted the apparent predominance of the

female form among dogū and the significance of these artefacts as representations of female goddesses, arising out of beliefs in the earth mother.[1] A large number of archaeologists around the mid-twentieth century concurred with the earth mother interpretation. But there was a major problem: beliefs in an earth mother are usually associated with agricultural societies, and this was not the case with Jōmon Japan.

All through history, one of the central aspects of 'culture' has been the development of religious beliefs and practices. People create a framework for understanding their own actions and their relations with other people in the context of the world they live in. Beliefs in forces that influence or supersede the power of nature have been important in helping people cope with the sometimes menacing realities of their existence: natural disasters, discord and strife with other groups, and of course the momentous events surrounding birth and death. Recourse to such beliefs manifests itself in the practice of prayer.

An abundance of natural resources enabled Jōmon people to develop stable lifestyles in the temperate latitudes in which many of the islands of the Japanese archipelago are situated. They were aware of the significance of their supportive and nurturing environment, a world with which they endeavoured to maintain harmony, and indeed they were reminded of the capriciousness of the natural world on occasion throughout the Jōmon period. The Jōmon would have prayed for prosperity and the continued reliability of food resources that underpinned their lifestyles, dependent as they were on the rich bounties of the deciduous broad-leafed forests in which the majority probably lived. Through these prayers and invocations, they came to terms with the vagaries of the natural world within which they lived out their lives. Believing in the existence of spirits within an all-encompassing nature, the Jōmon developed a world view shaped by the seasonal cycles of birth, death and resurrection, a drama that was played out all around them.

Prayer gradually became formalized and new types of ritual practice developed, culminating in the ceremonial events known in Japan as *matsuri*. This seasonal sensibility continues to be strongly felt by Japanese people, connecting them at some level with their Jōmon forebears. We can imagine Jōmon people engaging in ceremonies at key moments in the seasonal round, just as society today celebrates *matsuri*.

Beginning with rituals to ensure the wellbeing of the family, performed within the household in the context of close kin, over time ceremonies came to involve groups of families, then whole villages, eventually giving rise to regional ritual centres and events that drew people in from far and wide. A diversity of world views, customs and practices merged to form a distinctive Jōmon ritual expression. By the Middle Jōmon this was already well developed, and Shakadō was one of the first settlement complexes to emerge as an important regional centre of ritual activity, apparently achieving an exclusive role with regard to dogū in particular.

Archaeological interpretation is an imprecise science and it is difficult to describe exactly how dogū were used within Jōmon rituals. It does seem, however, that at the household level of ritual practice, dogū, perhaps especially those buried in pits or enshrined in stone cists, rendered the idea of the earth mother in a recognizable human form. Breaking the dogū within a ritualized space was probably no more significant than the expression of a desire to

Fig. 38 Excavations at Akyū on the south-western slopes of Yatsugatake, Nagano prefecture. Large-scale excavations of Jōmon settlements often take place in advance of development, in this case before the construction of a motorway service area.

ensure the prosperity of the group, or safe childbirth, or as simply an act of prayer. In breaking the dogū, in sending off the spirit embodied in the figure to its counterparts in the spirit world, it was hoped that the spirit would be propagated and that new versions would return in a form of rebirth or resurrection. This Jōmon world view required an understanding of the distinction between the everyday world of the living, this world, and the other world, where the spirits resided.

These ideas were formulated by Mizuno Masayoshi, who, in 1964, in his hugely influential if somewhat controversial reconstruction of Jōmon dogū rituals, evoked a quite specific vision of a Jōmon world view. He suggested that the way dogū operated in Jōmon belief systems was analogous to the much later Buddhist concept of the 'transmigration' (*rinne*) of spirits or souls, forming a link between the living and the dead. For Mizuno, dogū were the concrete manifestation of this belief. The death of the 'living woman' was metaphorically represented by breaking the dogū, an act that enabled the birth of the next soul. In this way, Mizuno considered that the dogū played the role of an actor, mediating between life and death.[2]

He went on to elaborate this idea further by suggesting that dogū fragments, by being distributed throughout the community once ritual ceremonies had been completed, and buried in the ground around individual dwelling places, enabled the resurrection of the whole village, rather than just particular persons within it. Mizuno thus provided Japanese archaeologists with

Fig. 39 Final Jōmon dogū from Nakaya, Yamanashi prefecture. This figure, with its apparently smiling 'V'-shaped mouth and clear ear ornaments is a slab-shaped dogū with incised decoration on its back and a distinctive hairstyle. This example of an enshrined figure was discovered, complete except for its two arms, in a setting of stones (h: 2.6 cm).

a compelling hypothesis that placed dogū firmly at the heart of their understanding of Jōmon belief systems. He envisaged the power of the dogū being transmitted around the settlement, binding together the various household groups that it comprised in the belief that the village would be reborn and renewed through the most important rituals of the year – those held to greet the spring.

A shift in the influence of dogū, from the household level to the larger arena of the settlement itself, is mirrored in the ways in which dogū were used. Although rare, the enshrinement of large, relatively complete examples began in the Middle Jōmon in the highlands of the Chūbu region and spread through much of central Honshu, notably towards the Japan Sea coast, before being taken up during the Late Jōmon at Gōhara and elsewhere around the Kantō plain. By the Final Jōmon the practice of enshrinement had taken root across eastern Honshu, arriving in northern Tōhoku.[3] As with the fragmented figures, these dogū, exemplified by the 'Venus' of Tanabatake and the pit-buried dogū from Shakadō, seem to transcend the household level of ritual and are associated with larger-scale practices that involved the whole settlement. Enshrined in their stone cists, with the emphasis on burying them for eternity, these goddesses symbolize the hopes of a people for the everlasting life of their community (fig. 39).

A further development in the story of dogū rituals occurred with the discovery, in a burial pit at Ōasa in Hokkaido (cat. 33), of a pair of dogū placed one on top of the other. The two figures, thought to represent a male and female form, suggest a new form of deposition, one that brings together individual expression and communal identity. They combine aspects of burial and the transgressing of normal social conditions implicit in *matsuri*, where solemn ritual

is mixed with joyful, sometimes seemingly irreverent celebration, a mixture of moods that encapsulates the perceived relationship between religion and the world as it really is. The Ōasa pair represents another facet in the increasingly complex role of dogū, evocative actors in the unrolling narratives of the Jōmon archipelago.

Prayers concealed within the Jōmon goddess

Jōmon pottery is remarkable for its unabashed abstract designs, usually executed in a flawless fashion. One of the enigmas of this Jōmon art, given the level of technical and representation skill exhibited on these pieces, is why Jōmon people did not choose to depict in a more realistic way the plants and animals with which they engaged on a daily basis. The same is true of the dogū. With few exceptions, these figures are very abstract versions of the human form. Heartfelt images of gods and goddesses, they were clearly affected by the same creative impulses expressed on Jōmon pottery vessels.

Despite their rather unnatural, almost 'deformed' shapes, it is probable that these forms, and some of the motifs included in the overall design, had specific significance for the people who made and used them. At Yokomachi in Tokyo a Middle Jōmon dogū was discovered seemingly wearing some form of footwear, perhaps boots.[4] These are represented as if clambering up the legs of the dogū, almost like a living thing, entwining the legs in a thick, somewhat impenetrable, coiling decoration. This form of ornament first appears in the Hokuriku region, on the Japan Sea coast of central Honshu, from around the beginning of the Middle Jōmon, where it is manifested in the *kappa*-style dogū and in the long braids of hair seen on the Nagayama dogū from Toyama prefecture. Shortly afterwards it is taken up in the central highlands of Honshu where it flourishes halfway through the Middle Jōmon. The coiling motif is also seen incised on the head of the Tanabatake 'Venus' (fig. 40). The Jōmon people of this region have attracted many inspired commentators, such as Fujimori Eiichi, who wrote that this coiled design represented a serpent, which in turn symbolized the earth mother. He also proposed that the use of this motif indicated the presence of special ritual practitioners.

There remains conjecture about what these coiled motifs really represent: a serpent or just a hairstyle. But many of the dogū that exhibit this pattern also share other distinctive features: narrow slanting eyes, open mouths and a facial expression that suggests they are rather pleased with themselves. These attributes are also seen on the projections, or handles, attached to the rims of pottery vessels from the same time and place (cat. 38). Writing about these projections, Fujimori, the mid-twentieth century doyen of the study of Middle Jōmon highland subcultures, suggested that the designs were a reflection of the pleasure to come from the nurturing food that would have been cooked in the pot. In the same way, Jōmon people expressed such feelings through the dogū that they created, further enhanced by a sense of sacredness, or *hare*.[5]

As time passed, Jōmon people decorated the bodies of their dogū further and gave them more developed limbs as well as paying more attention to the design of the torso. As the dogū were transformed from simple conceptual representations of the spirits to more developed manifestations of divine beings, perhaps analogous to traditional Japanese *kami* (Shinto spirits within objects), they were shaped in an increasingly realistic way. Kobayashi Tatsuo has written

Fig. 40 A number of Middle Jōmon dogū and ceramics from Middle Jōmon central Honshu bear this coiled-snake design, including Tanabatake and Sakai (cats 3 and 11).

Fig. 41 Many dogū have either representations of female genitalia or elaborate patterning around the pelvis (*from left to right*: cats 9, 10 and 22). Female attributes were emphasized on dogū up to the end of the Middle Jōmon, but from the Late Jōmon only the breasts remain (cat. 64).

that Jōmon dogū transcend gender, in a way familiar to modern Japanese people in representations of the Buddhist deity Kannon Bosatsu, and that they are concrete manifestations of Jōmon *kami*.[6] The very feminine nature of many dogū, however, even though often in a highly abstract form, argues for an emphasis on a female component in Jōmon belief systems. Whatever the significance of gender in the Jōmon world, dogū manifest the importance of birth. It may be that the notion of *kami* best approximates what dogū meant to Jōmon people, for, as we have seen through the breaking up and sending off rituals, central to their beliefs was the idea of resurrection and rebirth (*yomigaeri*). Hidden away in the design of the dogū we can perhaps find glimpses of the Jōmon understanding of prayer. Indeed, the female figurines of Jōmon may best be seen as tangible prayers.

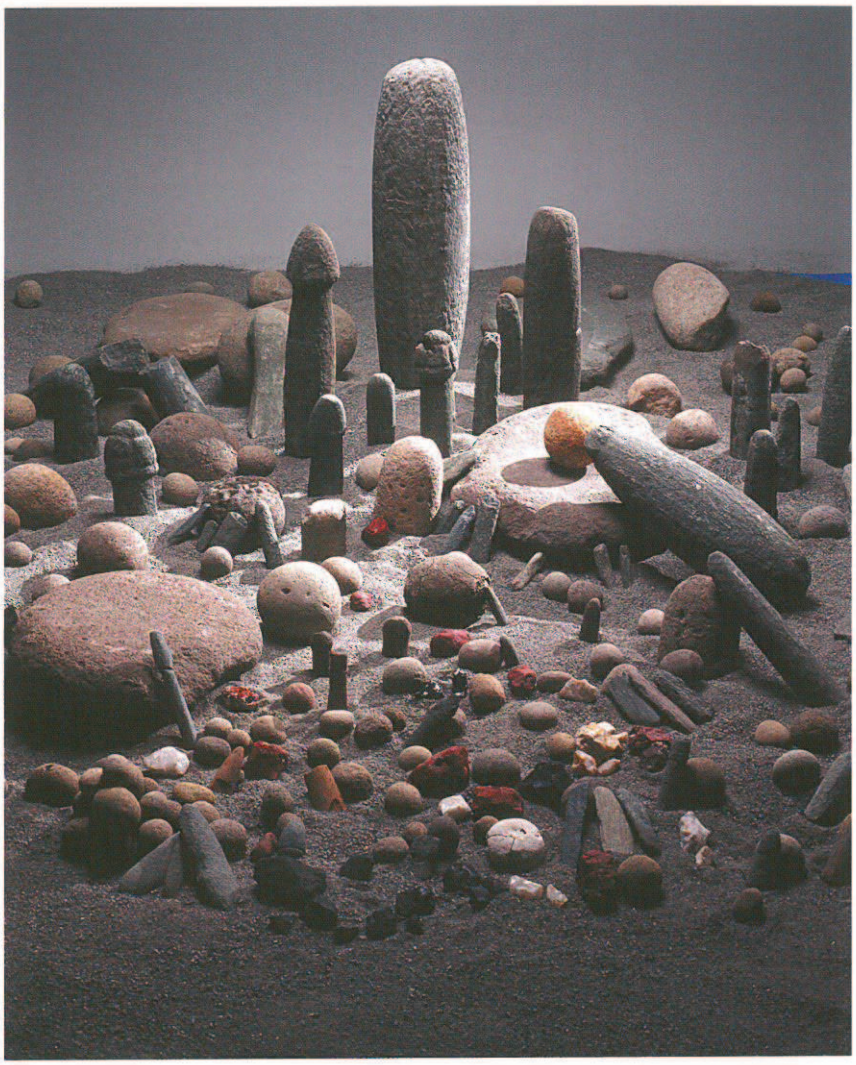
Reconstructing the Jōmon world view

The very earliest dogū, those from the Initial Jōmon, show no signs of being intentionally dismembered in the course of controlled ceremonies. Many of the early pieces are in fact relatively complete, and there is no evidence either for ritual breakage or special enshrinement. Perhaps these early dogū, made over a period of about 3,000 years, were simply discarded once the rituals in which they played a part were completed.

Then, as we have seen, intentional breaking of dogū began. Pieces of a figurine, depicted with a thin torso and constricted waist, but with its two legs broken off, were discovered in Shishinomae in Yamanashi prefecture (fig. 26). It is one of the earliest examples of a standing dogū, dating back to the end of the Early Jōmon period.[7] These pieces were all found in a single context, presaging the enshrinement form of deposition that would come in the Middle Jōmon and indicating links between standing dogū and deliberate breakage.

The Early Jōmon period was the time when Jōmon cultural traditions became established, particularly in the eastern part of the archipelago. The numbers of sites increased, settlements became larger in scale, and alongside the pit buildings that had been constructed since the Initial Jōmon, new forms of architecture appeared, including rectangular post-built structures and circular arrangements of stone settings (fig. 42). All this suggests an enhancement of Jōmon cultural status, associated with larger villages and developed social

Fig. 42 Stone bars from Tenjinbara, Gunma prefecture.



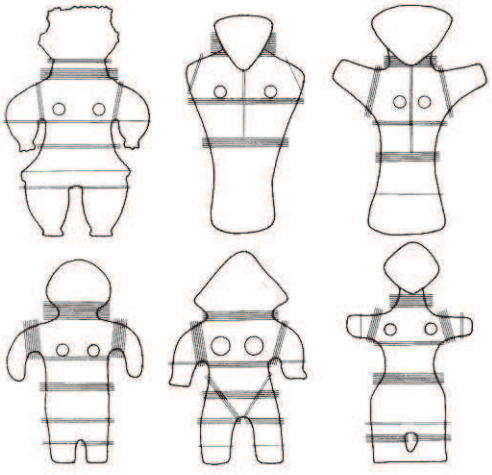


Fig. 43 Breakage patterns of dogū, showing the most common points of fragmentation for various forms of dogū. After Kobayashi 1977.

differences between individuals, supported by a new sedentary lifestyle in which people were able to live in one location all year round.

The evidence from Shishinomae suggests that rituals based on the intentional enshrinement of dogū were already taking place around this time. But these rituals were still occurring at a household level, as small-scale localized affairs, probably happening infrequently. Dogū rituals that involved the whole settlement, as described by Mizuno, did not develop until the Middle Jōmon.

From then until the end of the Jōmon period, the practice of enshrining dogū was one of the standard forms of Jōmon ritual, part of an established tradition of Jōmon religious practice. As these settlement-wide rituals took hold, 'Venus' images were made which were not intended to be broken and then at the end of the Jōmon period container-shaped dogū appeared. Mainstream dogū rituals, however, continued to centre around the breaking-up of figures – as Kobayashi Tatsuo so aptly expresses it, like slabs of chocolate. Ono Masafumi has shown through X-ray analysis of the dogū at Shakadō that this is indeed the case. His X-ray images clearly show the intentionally designed weaknesses between the component parts of the dogū (fig. 43).[8]

This sending off or 'killing' of goddesses of fertility to ensure continued good harvests and prosperity is a theme in stories found widely across South-East Asia, and forms part of the mythology relating to the origins of agriculture in these parts of the world. The mythologist Yoshida Atsuhiko refers to Indonesia, where the 'killed' goddess, called Hainuwele, appears in a myth resembling the story of Opogitsu-hime-no-kami, which is recounted in the early chronicles of Japan – the *Nihon shoki* and *Kojiki*. The great god Susanoo asks Opogitsu-hime for some food, and she produces various things for him to eat from orifices such as her nose, mouth and rectum. Susanoo thinks she is polluting the food before offering it to him. He subsequently kills her and various food plants grow out of her slain body: silkworms from her head, rice from her eyes, millet from her ears, red beans from her nose, wheat from her genitals and soy beans in her rectum. Of course, the economy of a society that depends on fishing, hunting and gathering is very different to that of an agriculturalist society. But the myth through which the killing of the god or goddess provides 'seed' for the people was perhaps as important for Jōmon people as it was for the early agriculturalists.[9]

Jōmon people, from the Middle Jōmon onwards, used dogū as figures of reverence to express their idea of the sacred. As actors in Jōmon ceremonies, dogū conveyed to the spirits the prayers of those taking part. In addition, through being broken up and sent off, dogū held the promise of new life for both individuals and communities. Some of these Jōmon concepts and traditions became so deeply engrained in the consciousness of the inhabitants of the Japanese archipelago that, taking different forms, they permeated the agricultural society that followed Jōmon; traces can still be detected in the myths and folklore of traditional Japan. While it is clear that agriculture had a great impact on Japanese mythology, being deeply implicated in the origin of Japanese religions, elements of the forest cultures of the Jōmon and their world views would seem to have survived and remain embedded in some form in later Japanese history.

Fig. 44 Detail of praying figure from Kazahari I (cat. 2).